

## CHAPTER SIX



### ***TALONS AND TEA LEAVES***

**W**hen Harry, Ron, and Hermione entered the Great Hall for breakfast the next day, the first thing they saw was Draco Malfoy, who seemed to be entertaining a large group of Slytherins with a very funny story. As they passed, Malfoy did a ridiculous impression of a swooning fit and there was a roar of laughter.

“Ignore him,” said Hermione, who was right behind Harry. “Just ignore him, it’s not worth it. . . .”

“Hey, Potter!” shrieked Pansy Parkinson, a Slytherin girl with a face like a pug. “Potter! The dementors are coming, Potter! Wooooooooo!”

Harry dropped into a seat at the Gryffindor table, next to George Weasley.

“New third-year course schedules,” said George, passing them over. “What’s up with you, Harry?”

“Malfoy,” said Ron, sitting down on George’s other side and glaring over at the Slytherin table.

George looked up in time to see Malfoy pretending to faint with terror again.

“That little git,” he said calmly. “He wasn’t so cocky last night when the dementors were down at our end of the train. Came running into our compartment, didn’t he, Fred?”

“Nearly wet himself,” said Fred, with a contemptuous glance at Malfoy.

“I wasn’t too happy myself,” said George. “They’re horrible things, those dementors. . . .”

“Sort of freeze your insides, don’t they?” said Fred.

“You didn’t pass out, though, did you?” said Harry in a low voice.

“Forget it, Harry,” said George bracingly. “Dad had to go out to Azkaban one time, remember, Fred? And he said it was the worst place he’d ever been, he came back all weak and shaking. . . . They suck the happiness out of a place, dementors. Most of the prisoners go mad in there.”

“Anyway, we’ll see how happy Malfoy looks after our first Quidditch match,” said Fred. “Gryffindor versus Slytherin, first game of the season, remember?”

The only time Harry and Malfoy had faced each other in a Quidditch match, Malfoy had definitely come off worse. Feeling slightly more cheerful, Harry helped himself to sausages and fried tomatoes.

Hermione was examining her new schedule.

“Ooh, good, we’re starting some new subjects today,” she said happily.

“Hermione,” said Ron, frowning as he looked over her shoulder, “they’ve messed up your schedule. Look — they’ve got you down for about ten subjects a day. There isn’t enough *time*.”

“I’ll manage. I’ve fixed it all with Professor McGonagall.”

“But look,” said Ron, laughing, “see this morning? Nine o’clock, Divination. And underneath, nine o’clock, Muggle Studies. And” — Ron leaned closer to the schedule, disbelieving — “*look* — underneath that, Arithmancy, *nine o’clock*. I mean, I know you’re good, Hermione, but no one’s *that* good. How’re you supposed to be in three classes at once?”

“Don’t be silly,” said Hermione shortly. “Of course I won’t be in three

classes at once.”

“Well, then —”

“Pass the marmalade,” said Hermione.

“But —”

“Oh, Ron, what’s it to you if my schedule’s a bit full?” Hermione snapped. “I told you, I’ve fixed it all with Professor McGonagall.”

Just then, Hagrid entered the Great Hall. He was wearing his long moleskin overcoat and was absentmindedly swinging a dead polecat from one enormous hand.

“All righ’?” he said eagerly, pausing on the way to the staff table. “Yer in my firs’ ever lesson! Right after lunch! Bin up since five gettin’ everythin’ ready. . . . Hope it’s okay. . . . Me, a teacher . . . hones’ly. . . .”

He grinned broadly at them and headed off to the staff table, still swinging the polecat.

“Wonder what he’s been getting ready?” said Ron, a note of anxiety in his voice.

The hall was starting to empty as people headed off toward their first lesson. Ron checked his course schedule.

“We’d better go, look, Divination’s at the top of North Tower. It’ll take us ten minutes to get there. . . .”

They finished their breakfasts hastily, said good-bye to Fred and George, and walked back through the hall. As they passed the Slytherin table, Malfoy did yet another impression of a fainting fit. The shouts of laughter followed Harry into the entrance hall.

The journey through the castle to North Tower was a long one. Two years at Hogwarts hadn’t taught them everything about the castle, and they had never been inside North Tower before.

“There’s — got — to — be — a — shortcut,” Ron panted as they climbed their seventh long staircase and emerged on an unfamiliar landing, where there was nothing but a large painting of a bare stretch of grass hanging on the

stone wall.

“I think it’s this way,” said Hermione, peering down the empty passage to the right.

“Can’t be,” said Ron. “That’s south, look, you can see a bit of the lake out of the window . . .”

Harry was watching the painting. A fat, dapple-gray pony had just ambled onto the grass and was grazing nonchalantly. Harry was used to the subjects of Hogwarts paintings moving around and leaving their frames to visit one another, but he always enjoyed watching it. A moment later, a short, squat knight in a suit of armor clanked into the picture after his pony. By the look of the grass stains on his metal knees, he had just fallen off.

“Aha!” he yelled, seeing Harry, Ron, and Hermione. “What villains are these, that trespass upon my private lands! Come to scorn at my fall, perchance? Draw, you knaves, you dogs!”

They watched in astonishment as the little knight tugged his sword out of its scabbard and began brandishing it violently, hopping up and down in rage. But the sword was too long for him; a particularly wild swing made him overbalance, and he landed facedown in the grass.

“Are you all right?” said Harry, moving closer to the picture.

“Get back, you scurvy braggart! Back, you rogue!”

The knight seized his sword again and used it to push himself back up, but the blade sank deeply into the grass and, though he pulled with all his might, he couldn’t get it out again. Finally, he had to flop back down onto the grass and push up his visor to mop his sweating face.

“Listen,” said Harry, taking advantage of the knight’s exhaustion, “we’re looking for the North Tower. You don’t know the way, do you?”

“A quest!” The knight’s rage seemed to vanish instantly. He clanked to his feet and shouted, “Come follow me, dear friends, and we shall find our goal, or else shall perish bravely in the charge!”

He gave the sword another fruitless tug, tried and failed to mount the fat

pony, gave up, and cried, "On foot then, good sirs and gentle lady! On! On!"

And he ran, clanking loudly, into the left side of the frame and out of sight.

They hurried after him along the corridor, following the sound of his armor. Every now and then they spotted him running through a picture ahead.

"Be of stout heart, the worst is yet to come!" yelled the knight, and they saw him reappear in front of an alarmed group of women in crinolines, whose picture hung on the wall of a narrow spiral staircase.

Puffing loudly, Harry, Ron, and Hermione climbed the tightly spiraling steps, getting dizzy and dizzier, until at last they heard the murmur of voices above them and knew they had reached the classroom.

"Farewell!" cried the knight, popping his head into a painting of some sinister-looking monks. "Farewell, my comrades-in-arms! If ever you have need of noble heart and steely sinew, call upon Sir Cadogan!"

"Yeah, we'll call you," muttered Ron as the knight disappeared, "if we ever need someone mental."

They climbed the last few steps and emerged onto a tiny landing, where most of the class was already assembled. There were no doors off this landing, but Ron nudged Harry and pointed at the ceiling, where there was a circular trapdoor with a brass plaque on it.

"Sybill Trelawney, Divination teacher," Harry read. "How're we supposed to get up there?"

As though in answer to his question, the trapdoor suddenly opened, and a silvery ladder descended right at Harry's feet. Everyone got quiet.

"After you," said Ron, grinning, so Harry climbed the ladder first.

He emerged into the strangest-looking classroom he had ever seen. In fact, it didn't look like a classroom at all, more like a cross between someone's attic and an old-fashioned tea shop. At least twenty small, circular tables were crammed inside it, all surrounded by chintz armchairs and fat little poufs. Everything was lit with a dim, crimson light; the curtains at the windows were all closed, and the many lamps were draped with dark red scarves. It was

stiflingly warm, and the fire that was burning under the crowded mantelpiece was giving off a heavy, sickly sort of perfume as it heated a large copper kettle. The shelves running around the circular walls were crammed with dusty-looking feathers, stubs of candles, many packs of tattered playing cards, countless silvery crystal balls, and a huge array of teacups.

Ron appeared at Harry's shoulder as the class assembled around them, all talking in whispers.

"Where is she?" Ron said.

A voice came suddenly out of the shadows, a soft, misty sort of voice.

"Welcome," it said. "How nice to see you in the physical world at last."

Harry's immediate impression was of a large, glittering insect. Professor Trelawney moved into the firelight, and they saw that she was very thin; her large glasses magnified her eyes to several times their natural size, and she was draped in a gauzy spangled shawl. Innumerable chains and beads hung around her spindly neck, and her arms and hands were encrusted with bangles and rings.

"Sit, my children, sit," she said, and they all climbed awkwardly into armchairs or sank onto poufs. Harry, Ron, and Hermione sat themselves around the same round table.

"Welcome to Divination," said Professor Trelawney, who had seated herself in a winged armchair in front of the fire. "My name is Professor Trelawney. You may not have seen me before. I find that descending too often into the hustle and bustle of the main school clouds my Inner Eye."

Nobody said anything to this extraordinary pronouncement. Professor Trelawney delicately rearranged her shawl and continued, "So you have chosen to study Divination, the most difficult of all magical arts. I must warn you at the outset that if you do not have the Sight, there is very little I will be able to teach you. Books can take you only so far in this field. . . ."

At these words, both Harry and Ron glanced, grinning, at Hermione, who looked startled at the news that books wouldn't be much help in this subject.

"Many witches and wizards, talented though they are in the area of loud

bangs and smells and sudden disappearings, are yet unable to penetrate the veiled mysteries of the future,” Professor Trelawney went on, her enormous, gleaming eyes moving from face to nervous face. “It is a Gift granted to few. You, boy,” she said suddenly to Neville, who almost toppled off his pouf. “Is your grandmother well?”

“I think so,” said Neville tremulously.

“I wouldn’t be so sure if I were you, dear,” said Professor Trelawney, the firelight glinting on her long emerald earrings. Neville gulped. Professor Trelawney continued placidly. “We will be covering the basic methods of Divination this year. The first term will be devoted to reading the tea leaves. Next term we shall progress to palmistry. By the way, my dear,” she shot suddenly at Parvati Patil, “beware a red-haired man.”

Parvati gave a startled look at Ron, who was right behind her, and edged her chair away from him.

“In the second term,” Professor Trelawney went on, “we shall progress to the crystal ball — if we have finished with fire omens, that is. Unfortunately, classes will be disrupted in February by a nasty bout of flu. I myself will lose my voice. And around Easter, one of our number will leave us forever.”

A very tense silence followed this pronouncement, but Professor Trelawney seemed unaware of it.

“I wonder, dear,” she said to Lavender Brown, who was nearest and shrank back in her chair, “if you could pass me the largest silver teapot?”

Lavender, looking relieved, stood up, took an enormous teapot from the shelf, and put it down on the table in front of Professor Trelawney.

“Thank you, my dear. Incidentally, that thing you are dreading — it will happen on Friday the sixteenth of October.”

Lavender trembled.

“Now, I want you all to divide into pairs. Collect a teacup from the shelf, come to me, and I will fill it. Then sit down and drink, drink until only the dregs remain. Swill these around the cup three times with the left hand, then turn the cup upside down on its saucer, wait for the last of the tea to drain

away, then give your cup to your partner to read. You will interpret the patterns using pages five and six of *Unfogging the Future*. I shall move among you, helping and instructing. Oh, and dear” — she caught Neville by the arm as he made to stand up — “after you’ve broken your first cup, would you be so kind as to select one of the blue-patterned ones? I’m rather attached to the pink.”

Sure enough, Neville had no sooner reached the shelf of teacups when there was a tinkle of breaking china. Professor Trelawney swept over to him holding a dustpan and brush and said, “One of the blue ones, then, dear, if you wouldn’t mind . . . thank you. . . .”

When Harry and Ron had had their teacups filled, they went back to their table and tried to drink the scalding tea quickly. They swilled the dregs around as Professor Trelawney had instructed, then drained the cups and swapped them.

“Right,” said Ron as they both opened their books at pages five and six. “What can you see in mine?”

“A load of soggy brown stuff,” said Harry. The heavily perfumed smoke in the room was making him feel sleepy and stupid.

“Broaden your minds, my dears, and allow your eyes to see past the mundane!” Professor Trelawney cried through the gloom.

Harry tried to pull himself together.

“Right, you’ve got a crooked sort of cross . . .” He consulted *Unfogging the Future*. “That means you’re going to have ‘trials and suffering’ — sorry about that — but there’s a thing that could be the sun . . . hang on . . . that means ‘great happiness’ . . . so you’re going to suffer but be very happy. . . .”

“You need your Inner Eye tested, if you ask me,” said Ron, and they both had to stifle their laughs as Professor Trelawney gazed in their direction.

“My turn . . .” Ron peered into Harry’s teacup, his forehead wrinkled with effort. “There’s a blob a bit like a bowler hat,” he said. “Maybe you’re going to work for the Ministry of Magic. . . .”

He turned the teacup the other way up.



“But this way it looks more like an acorn. . . . What’s that?” He scanned his copy of *Unfogging the Future*. “‘A windfall, unexpected gold.’ Excellent, you can lend me some . . . and there’s a thing here,” he turned the cup again, “that looks like an animal . . . yeah, if that was its head . . . it looks like a hippo . . . no, a sheep . . .”

Professor Trelawney whirled around as Harry let out a snort of laughter.

“Let me see that, my dear,” she said reprovingly to Ron, sweeping over and snatching Harry’s cup from him. Everyone went quiet to watch.

Professor Trelawney was staring into the teacup, rotating it counterclockwise.

“The falcon . . . my dear, you have a deadly enemy.”

“But everyone knows *that*,” said Hermione in a loud whisper. Professor Trelawney stared at her.

“Well, they do,” said Hermione. “Everybody knows about Harry and You-Know-Who.”

Harry and Ron stared at her with a mixture of amazement and admiration. They had never heard Hermione speak to a teacher like that before. Professor Trelawney chose not to reply. She lowered her huge eyes to Harry’s cup again and continued to turn it.

“The club . . . an attack. Dear, dear, this is not a happy cup. . . .”

“I thought that was a bowler hat,” said Ron sheepishly.

“The skull . . . danger in your path, my dear. . . .”

Everyone was staring, transfixed, at Professor Trelawney, who gave the cup a final turn, gasped, and then screamed.

There was another tinkle of breaking china; Neville had smashed his second cup. Professor Trelawney sank into a vacant armchair, her glittering hand at her heart and her eyes closed.

“My dear boy . . . my poor, dear boy . . . no . . . it is kinder not to say . . . no . . . don’t ask me. . . .”

“What is it, Professor?” said Dean Thomas at once. Everyone had got to their feet, and slowly they crowded around Harry and Ron’s table, pressing close to Professor Trelawney’s chair to get a good look at Harry’s cup.

“My dear,” Professor Trelawney’s huge eyes opened dramatically, “you have the Grim.”

“The what?” said Harry.

He could tell that he wasn’t the only one who didn’t understand; Dean Thomas shrugged at him and Lavender Brown looked puzzled, but nearly everybody else clapped their hands to their mouths in horror.

“The Grim, my dear, the Grim!” cried Professor Trelawney, who looked shocked that Harry hadn’t understood. “The giant, spectral dog that haunts churchyards! My dear boy, it is an omen — the worst omen — of *death*!”

Harry’s stomach lurched. That dog on the cover of *Death Omens* in Flourish and Blotts — the dog in the shadows of Magnolia Crescent . . . Lavender Brown clapped her hands to her mouth too. Everyone was looking at Harry, everyone except Hermione, who had gotten up and moved around to the back of Professor Trelawney’s chair.

“I don’t think it looks like a Grim,” she said flatly.

Professor Trelawney surveyed Hermione with mounting dislike.

“You’ll forgive me for saying so, my dear, but I perceive very little aura around you. Very little receptivity to the resonances of the future.”

Seamus Finnigan was tilting his head from side to side.

“It looks like a Grim if you do this,” he said, with his eyes almost shut, “but it looks more like a donkey from here,” he said, leaning to the left.

“When you’ve all finished deciding whether I’m going to die or not!” said Harry, taking even himself by surprise. Now nobody seemed to want to look at him.

“I think we will leave the lesson here for today,” said Professor Trelawney in her mistiest voice. “Yes . . . please pack away your things. . . .”

Silently the class took their teacups back to Professor Trelawney, packed

away their books, and closed their bags. Even Ron was avoiding Harry's eyes.

"Until we meet again," said Professor Trelawney faintly, "fair fortune be yours. Oh, and dear" — she pointed at Neville — "you'll be late next time, so mind you work extra-hard to catch up."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione descended Professor Trelawney's ladder and the winding stair in silence, then set off for Professor McGonagall's Transfiguration lesson. It took them so long to find her classroom that, early as they had left Divination, they were only just in time.

Harry chose a seat right at the back of the room, feeling as though he were sitting in a very bright spotlight; the rest of the class kept shooting furtive glances at him, as though he were about to drop dead at any moment. He hardly heard what Professor McGonagall was telling them about Animagi (wizards who could transform at will into animals), and wasn't even watching when she transformed herself in front of their eyes into a tabby cat with spectacle markings around her eyes.

"Really, what has got into you all today?" said Professor McGonagall, turning back into herself with a faint *pop*, and staring around at them all. "Not that it matters, but that's the first time my transformation's not got applause from a class."

Everybody's heads turned toward Harry again, but nobody spoke. Then Hermione raised her hand.

"Please, Professor, we've just had our first Divination class, and we were reading the tea leaves, and —"

"Ah, of course," said Professor McGonagall, suddenly frowning. "There is no need to say any more, Miss Granger. Tell me, which of you will be dying this year?"

Everyone stared at her.

"Me," said Harry, finally.

"I see," said Professor McGonagall, fixing Harry with her beady eyes. "Then you should know, Potter, that Sybill Trelawney has predicted the death of one student a year since she arrived at this school. None of them has died

yet. Seeing death omens is her favorite way of greeting a new class. If it were not for the fact that I never speak ill of my colleagues —”

Professor McGonagall broke off, and they saw that her nostrils had gone white. She went on, more calmly, “Divination is one of the most imprecise branches of magic. I shall not conceal from you that I have very little patience with it. True Seers are very rare, and Professor Trelawney —”

She stopped again, and then said, in a very matter-of-fact tone, “You look in excellent health to me, Potter, so you will excuse me if I don’t let you off homework today. I assure you that if you die, you need not hand it in.”

Hermione laughed. Harry felt a bit better. It was harder to feel scared of a lump of tea leaves away from the dim red light and befuddling perfume of Professor Trelawney’s classroom. Not everyone was convinced, however. Ron still looked worried, and Lavender whispered, “But what about Neville’s cup?”

When the Transfiguration class had finished, they joined the crowd thundering toward the Great Hall for lunch.

“Ron, cheer up,” said Hermione, pushing a dish of stew toward him. “You heard what Professor McGonagall said.”

Ron spooned stew onto his plate and picked up his fork but didn’t start.

“Harry,” he said, in a low, serious voice, “you *haven’t* seen a great black dog anywhere, have you?”

“Yeah, I have,” said Harry. “I saw one the night I left the Dursleys’.”

Ron let his fork fall with a clatter.

“Probably a stray,” said Hermione calmly.

Ron looked at Hermione as though she had gone mad.

“Hermione, if Harry’s seen a Grim, that’s — that’s bad,” he said. “My — my uncle Bilius saw one and — and he died twenty-four hours later!”

“Coincidence,” said Hermione airily, pouring herself some pumpkin juice.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about!” said Ron, starting to get

angry. “Grims scare the living daylight out of most wizards!”

“There you are, then,” said Hermione in a superior tone. “They see the Grim and die of fright. The Grim’s not an omen, it’s the cause of death! And Harry’s still with us because he’s not stupid enough to see one and think, right, well, I’d better kick the bucket then!”

Ron mouthed wordlessly at Hermione, who opened her bag, took out her new Arithmancy book, and propped it open against the juice jug.

“I think Divination seems very woolly,” she said, searching for her page. “A lot of guesswork, if you ask me.”

“There was nothing woolly about the Grim in that cup!” said Ron hotly.

“You didn’t seem quite so confident when you were telling Harry it was a sheep,” said Hermione coolly.

“Professor Trelawney said you didn’t have the right aura! You just don’t like being bad at something for a change!”

He had touched a nerve. Hermione slammed her Arithmancy book down on the table so hard that bits of meat and carrot flew everywhere.

“If being good at Divination means I have to pretend to see death omens in a lump of tea leaves, I’m not sure I’ll be studying it much longer! That lesson was absolute rubbish compared with my Arithmancy class!”

She snatched up her bag and stalked away.

Ron frowned after her.

“What’s she talking about?” he said to Harry. “She hasn’t been to an Arithmancy class yet.”

Harry was pleased to get out of the castle after lunch. Yesterday’s rain had cleared; the sky was a clear, pale gray, and the grass was springy and damp underfoot as they set off for their first-ever Care of Magical Creatures class.

Ron and Hermione weren’t speaking to each other. Harry walked beside them in silence as they went down the sloping lawns to Hagrid’s hut on the edge of the Forbidden Forest. It was only when he spotted three only-too-familiar backs ahead of them that he realized they must be having these

lessons with the Slytherins. Malfoy was talking animatedly to Crabbe and Goyle, who were chortling. Harry was quite sure he knew what they were talking about.

Hagrid was waiting for his class at the door of his hut. He stood in his moleskin overcoat, with Fang the boarhound at his heels, looking impatient to start.

“C’mon, now, get a move on!” he called as the class approached. “Got a real treat for yeh today! Great lesson comin’ up! Everyone here? Right, follow me!”

For one nasty moment, Harry thought that Hagrid was going to lead them into the forest; Harry had had enough unpleasant experiences in there to last him a lifetime. However, Hagrid strolled off around the edge of the trees, and five minutes later, they found themselves outside a kind of paddock. There was nothing in there.

“Everyone gather ’round the fence here!” he called. “That’s it — make sure yeh can see — now, firs’ thing yeh’ll want ter do is open yer books —”

“How?” said the cold, drawling voice of Draco Malfoy.

“Eh?” said Hagrid.

“How do we open our books?” Malfoy repeated. He took out his copy of *The Monster Book of Monsters*, which he had bound shut with a length of rope. Other people took theirs out too; some, like Harry, had belted their book shut; others had crammed them inside tight bags or clamped them together with binder clips.

“Hasn’ — hasn’ anyone bin able ter open their books?” said Hagrid, looking crestfallen.

The class all shook their heads.

“Yeh’ve got ter *stroke* ’em,” said Hagrid, as though this was the most obvious thing in the world. “Look —”

He took Hermione’s copy and ripped off the Spellotape that bound it. The book tried to bite, but Hagrid ran a giant forefinger down its spine, and the

book shivered, and then fell open and lay quiet in his hand.

“Oh, how silly we’ve all been!” Malfoy sneered. “We should have *stroked* them! Why didn’t we guess!”

“I — I thought they were funny,” Hagrid said uncertainly to Hermione.

“Oh, tremendously funny!” said Malfoy. “Really witty, giving us books that try and rip our hands off!”

“Shut up, Malfoy,” said Harry quietly. Hagrid was looking downcast and Harry wanted Hagrid’s first lesson to be a success.

“Righ’ then,” said Hagrid, who seemed to have lost his thread, “so — so yeh’ve got yer books an’ — an’ — now yeh need the Magical Creatures. Yeah. So I’ll go an’ get ’em. Hang on . . .”

He strode away from them into the forest and out of sight.

“God, this place is going to the dogs,” said Malfoy loudly. “That oaf teaching classes, my father’ll have a fit when I tell him —”

“Shut up, Malfoy,” Harry repeated.

“Careful, Potter, there’s a dementor behind you —”

“Oooooooh!” squealed Lavender Brown, pointing toward the opposite side of the paddock.

Trotting toward them were a dozen of the most bizarre creatures Harry had ever seen. They had the bodies, hind legs, and tails of horses, but the front legs, wings, and heads of what seemed to be giant eagles, with cruel, steel-colored beaks and large, brilliantly orange eyes. The talons on their front legs were half a foot long and deadly looking. Each of the beasts had a thick leather collar around its neck, which was attached to a long chain, and the ends of all of these were held in the vast hands of Hagrid, who came jogging into the paddock behind the creatures.

“Gee up, there!” he roared, shaking the chains and urging the creatures toward the fence where the class stood. Everyone drew back slightly as Hagrid reached them and tethered the creatures to the fence.

“Hippogriffs!” Hagrid roared happily, waving a hand at them. “Beau’iful,

aren' they?"

Harry could sort of see what Hagrid meant. Once you got over the first shock of seeing something that was half horse, half bird, you started to appreciate the hippogriffs' gleaming coats, changing smoothly from feather to hair, each of them a different color: stormy gray, bronze, pinkish roan, gleaming chestnut, and inky black.

"So," said Hagrid, rubbing his hands together and beaming around, "if yeh wan' ter come a bit nearer —"

No one seemed to want to. Harry, Ron, and Hermione, however, approached the fence cautiously.

"Now, firs' thing yeh gotta know abou' hippogriffs is, they're proud," said Hagrid. "Easily offended, hippogriffs are. Don't never insult one, 'cause it might be the last thing yeh do."

Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle weren't listening; they were talking in an undertone and Harry had a nasty feeling they were plotting how best to disrupt the lesson.

"Yeh always wait fer the hippogriff ter make the firs' move," Hagrid continued. "It's polite, see? Yeh walk toward him, and yeh bow, an' yeh wait. If he bows back, yeh're allowed ter touch him. If he doesn' bow, then get away from him sharpish, 'cause those talons hurt."

"Right — who wants ter go first?"

Most of the class backed farther away in answer. Even Harry, Ron, and Hermione had misgivings. The hippogriffs were tossing their fierce heads and flexing their powerful wings; they didn't seem to like being tethered like this.

"No one?" said Hagrid, with a pleading look.

"I'll do it," said Harry.

There was an intake of breath from behind him, and both Lavender and Parvati whispered, "Oooh, no, Harry, remember your tea leaves!"

Harry ignored them. He climbed over the paddock fence.

"Good man, Harry!" roared Hagrid. "Right then — let's see how yeh get on



with Buckbeak.”

He untied one of the chains, pulled the gray hippogriff away from its fellows, and slipped off its leather collar. The class on the other side of the paddock seemed to be holding its breath. Malfoy’s eyes were narrowed maliciously.

“Easy, now, Harry,” said Hagrid quietly. “Yeh’ve got eye contact, now try not ter blink. . . . Hippogriffs don’ trust yeh if yeh blink too much. . . .”

Harry’s eyes immediately began to water, but he didn’t shut them. Buckbeak had turned his great, sharp head and was staring at Harry with one fierce orange eye.

“Tha’s it,” said Hagrid. “Tha’s it, Harry . . . now, bow . . .”

Harry didn’t feel much like exposing the back of his neck to Buckbeak, but he did as he was told. He gave a short bow and then looked up.

The hippogriff was still staring haughtily at him. It didn’t move.

“Ah,” said Hagrid, sounding worried. “Right — back away, now, Harry, easy does it —”

But then, to Harry’s enormous surprise, the hippogriff suddenly bent its scaly front knees and sank into what was an unmistakable bow.

“Well done, Harry!” said Hagrid, ecstatic. “Right — yeh can touch him! Pat his beak, go on!”

Feeling that a better reward would have been to back away, Harry moved slowly toward the hippogriff and reached out toward it. He patted the beak several times and the hippogriff closed its eyes lazily, as though enjoying it.

The class broke into applause, all except for Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle, who were looking deeply disappointed.

“Righ’ then, Harry,” said Hagrid. “I reckon he might’ let yeh ride him!”

This was more than Harry had bargained for. He was used to a broomstick; but he wasn’t sure a hippogriff would be quite the same.

“Yeh climb up there, jus’ behind the wing joint,” said Hagrid, “an’ mind

yeh don' pull any of his feathers out, he won' like that. . . .”

Harry put his foot on the top of Buckbeak's wing and hoisted himself onto its back. Buckbeak stood up. Harry wasn't sure where to hold on; everything in front of him was covered with feathers.

“Go on, then!” roared Hagrid, slapping the hippogriff's hindquarters.

Without warning, twelve-foot wings flapped open on either side of Harry; he just had time to seize the hippogriff around the neck before he was soaring upward. It was nothing like a broomstick, and Harry knew which one he preferred; the hippogriff's wings beat uncomfortably on either side of him, catching him under his legs and making him feel he was about to be thrown off; the glossy feathers slipped under his fingers and he didn't dare get a stronger grip; instead of the smooth action of his Nimbus Two Thousand, he now felt himself rocking backward and forward as the hindquarters of the hippogriff rose and fell with its wings.

Buckbeak flew him once around the paddock and then headed back to the ground; this was the bit Harry had been dreading; he leaned back as the smooth neck lowered, feeling he was going to slip off over the beak, then felt a heavy thud as the four ill-assorted feet hit the ground. He just managed to hold on and push himself straight again.

“Good work, Harry!” roared Hagrid as everyone except Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle cheered. “Okay, who else wants a go?”

Emboldened by Harry's success, the rest of the class climbed cautiously into the paddock. Hagrid untied the hippogriffs one by one, and soon people were bowing nervously, all over the paddock. Neville ran repeatedly backward from his, which didn't seem to want to bend its knees. Ron and Hermione practiced on the chestnut, while Harry watched.

Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle had taken over Buckbeak. He had bowed to Malfoy, who was now patting his beak, looking disdainful.

“This is very easy,” Malfoy drawled, loud enough for Harry to hear him. “I knew it must have been, if Potter could do it. . . . I bet you're not dangerous at all, are you?” he said to the hippogriff. “Are you, you great ugly brute?”

It happened in a flash of steely talons; Malfoy let out a high-pitched scream and next moment, Hagrid was wrestling Buckbeak back into his collar as he strained to get at Malfoy, who lay curled in the grass, blood blossoming over his robes.

“I’m dying!” Malfoy yelled as the class panicked. “I’m dying, look at me! It’s killed me!”

“Yer not dyin’!” said Hagrid, who had gone very white. “Someone help me — gotta get him outta here —”

Hermione ran to hold open the gate as Hagrid lifted Malfoy easily. As they passed, Harry saw that there was a long, deep gash on Malfoy’s arm; blood splattered the grass and Hagrid ran with him, up the slope toward the castle.

Very shaken, the Care of Magical Creatures class followed at a walk. The Slytherins were all shouting about Hagrid.

“They should fire him straight away!” said Pansy Parkinson, who was in tears.

“It was Malfoy’s fault!” snapped Dean Thomas. Crabbe and Goyle flexed their muscles threateningly.

They all climbed the stone steps into the deserted entrance hall.

“I’m going to see if he’s okay!” said Pansy, and they all watched her run up the marble staircase. The Slytherins, still muttering about Hagrid, headed away in the direction of their dungeon common room; Harry, Ron, and Hermione proceeded upstairs to Gryffindor Tower.

“D’you think he’ll be all right?” said Hermione nervously.

“Course he will. Madam Pomfrey can mend cuts in about a second,” said Harry, who had had far worse injuries mended magically by the nurse.

“That was a really bad thing to happen in Hagrid’s first class, though, wasn’t it?” said Ron, looking worried. “Trust Malfoy to mess things up for him. . . .”

They were among the first to reach the Great Hall at dinnertime, hoping to see Hagrid, but he wasn’t there.

“They *wouldn’t* fire him, would they?” said Hermione anxiously, not touching her steak-and-kidney pudding.

“They’d better not,” said Ron, who wasn’t eating either.

Harry was watching the Slytherin table. A large group including Crabbe and Goyle was huddled together, deep in conversation. Harry was sure they were cooking up their own version of how Malfoy had been injured.

“Well, you can’t say it wasn’t an interesting first day back,” said Ron gloomily.

They went up to the crowded Gryffindor common room after dinner and tried to do the homework Professor McGonagall had given them, but all three of them kept breaking off and glancing out of the tower window.

“There’s a light on in Hagrid’s window,” Harry said suddenly.

Ron looked at his watch.

“If we hurried, we could go down and see him. It’s still quite early. . . .”

“I don’t know,” Hermione said slowly, and Harry saw her glance at him.

“I’m allowed to walk across the *grounds*,” he said pointedly. “Sirius Black hasn’t got past the dementors here, has he?”

So they put their things away and headed out of the portrait hole, glad not to meet anybody on their way to the front doors, as they weren’t entirely sure they were supposed to be out.

The grass was still wet and looked almost black in the twilight. When they reached Hagrid’s hut, they knocked, and a voice growled, “C’min.”

Hagrid was sitting in his shirtsleeves at his scrubbed wooden table; his boarhound, Fang, had his head in Hagrid’s lap. One look told them that Hagrid had been drinking a lot; there was a pewter tankard almost as big as a bucket in front of him, and he seemed to be having difficulty getting them into focus.

“‘Spect it’s a record,” he said thickly, when he recognized them. “Don’ reckon they’ve ever had a teacher who lasted on’y a day before.”

“You haven’t been fired, Hagrid!” gasped Hermione.

“Not yet,” said Hagrid miserably, taking a huge gulp of whatever was in the tankard. “But ’s only a matter o’ time, i’n’t it, after Malfoy . . .”

“How is he?” said Ron as they all sat down. “It wasn’t serious, was it?”

“Madam Pomfrey fixed him best she could,” said Hagrid dully, “but he’s sayin’ it’s still agony . . . covered in bandages . . . moanin’ . . .”

“He’s faking it,” said Harry at once. “Madam Pomfrey can mend anything. She regrew half my bones last year. Trust Malfoy to milk it for all it’s worth.”

“School gov’nors have bin told, o’ course,” said Hagrid miserably. “They reckon I started too big. Shoulda left hippogriffs fer later . . . done flobberworms or summat. . . . Jus’ thought it’d make a good firs’ lesson. . . . ’S all my fault. . . .”

“It’s all *Malfoy*’s fault, Hagrid!” said Hermione earnestly.

“We’re witnesses,” said Harry. “You said hippogriffs attack if you insult them. It’s Malfoy’s problem that he wasn’t listening. We’ll tell Dumbledore what really happened.”

“Yeah, don’t worry, Hagrid, we’ll back you up,” said Ron.

Tears leaked out of the crinkled corners of Hagrid’s beetle-black eyes. He grabbed both Harry and Ron and pulled them into a bone-breaking hug.

“I think you’ve had enough to drink, Hagrid,” said Hermione firmly. She took the tankard from the table and went outside to empty it.

“Ar, maybe she’s right,” said Hagrid, letting go of Harry and Ron, who both staggered away, rubbing their ribs. Hagrid heaved himself out of his chair and followed Hermione unsteadily outside. They heard a loud splash.

“What’s he done?” said Harry nervously as Hermione came back in with the empty tankard.

“Stuck his head in the water barrel,” said Hermione, putting the tankard away.

Hagrid came back, his long hair and beard sopping wet, wiping the water

out of his eyes.

“Tha’s better,” he said, shaking his head like a dog and drenching them all. “Listen, it was good of yeh ter come an’ see me, I really —”

Hagrid stopped dead, staring at Harry as though he’d only just realized he was there.

“WHAT D’YEH THINK YOU’RE DOIN’, EH?” he roared, so suddenly that they jumped a foot in the air. “YEH’RE NOT TO GO WANDERIN’ AROUND AFTER DARK, HARRY! AN’ YOU TWO! LETTIN’ HIM!”

Hagrid strode over to Harry, grabbed his arm, and pulled him to the door.

“C’mon!” Hagrid said angrily. “I’m takin’ yer all back up ter school, an’ don’ let me catch yeh walkin’ down ter see me after dark again. I’m not worth that!”